

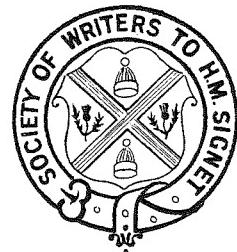
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The History of the Society of Writers to
HM Signet and the Signet Library

Extract from *The Register of the Society
of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet*
(Edinburgh 1983)

Introduction
(reprising the narratives from the 1890
and 1936 *History*)

REGISTER OF
THE SOCIETY OF WRITERS TO
HER MAJESTY'S SIGNET



EDINBURGH

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INTRODUCTION

The Writers to the Signet have existed as a corporate entity for over 500 years. It is impossible to say precisely when the Society came into being. The earliest entry in this Register is that of Sir John Reid, or "Rede" (before 1460) and there are several other entries which pre-date the year 1500; but the Signet, the seal adhibited by the King to authenticate documents in which he was specially interested, had been in use for at least a century beforehand. The custody and use of the Signet was entrusted to an officer known as the King's Secretary who was "the king's right hand at the pen, the issuer of the royal manuscript authority, whether for the ends of state policy, for transactions of law, or for private purposes."¹ Walter of Wardlaw, who was the King's Secretary in 1369, is the first office-bearer recognised by the Society; and the earliest members of the Society were those who acted as clerks or assistants to the office of the King's Secretary. The first "Writer to the King's Signet" formally so styled was Walter Chapman, or "Chepman" (before 1494).

The immensely long history of the Society, spanning as it does more than half a millennium, has still to be fully chronicled. Various historical accounts have been published from time to time, but they are all of a limited or specialised nature and do not add up to a comprehensive history. The chief purpose of the present volume is to bring up to date the lists of members contained in two earlier publications, *A History of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet* (1890) and *The Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet* (1936).² For convenience these publications are referred to in this Introduction as the "1890 History" and the "1936 History" respectively.

The list of members contained in the 1890 History is confined to "the names of those Writers to the Signet whose admissions are registered in the existing Minutes of the Society, or who are otherwise recorded therein."³ This means that no members of a date prior to 1594 are included for it was in that year that the Society's Minutes began with the narrative of a Commission granted by Sir Richard Cockburne of Clerkington, the Lord Secretary, in favour of John Layng, his depute and Keeper of the Signet, and eighteen other members of the Society appointed as Commissioners. The information included under each entry is relatively brief, being confined for the most part to dates of admission, birth and death, along with details of parentage, apprenticeship and any offices, appointments or publications. In many of the early entries, certain of these basic details are lacking. Occasionally, we find additional fragments of biographical information, especially of a notorious nature, but these appear haphazardly and without any evidence of systematic research. Thus, we discover that Archibald Houstoun was killed in a brawl by Gilbert Kennedy in 1706, and that James Stuart of Dunearn killed Sir Alexander Boswell in a duel in 1822 and was later acquitted when tried for murder.

1. 1890 History, p. xii.
2. The full titles of the two volumes are as follows:—*A History of the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet with a List of the Members of the Society from 1594 to 1890 and an Abstract of the Minutes* (1890), and *The Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet with a List of the Members and Abstracts of the Minutes of the Society, the Commissioners and the Council and the Early History of the Scottish Signet* (1936). It should be noted that the 1936 volume does not contain a history of the Society as such and the title on the spine ("A History of the Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet") is incorrect and inconsistent with the title-page.
3. 1890 History, p.cxxx.

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The 1936 History updates the list of members to include all those admitted up to the end of 1935, involving some 500 additional entries. The list was also extended backwards to include all known Writers to the Signet from the earliest times up to 1594. Many further particulars had been gathered between 1890 and 1935 and the entire 1890 list was rewritten. Unfortunately, many details pertaining to members had to be omitted owing to the exigencies of space so that the 1936 volume does not in fact contain a significant amount of additional biographical material. The entries for Hamilton Bell and John Bell of Greenhill may be cited as examples. In the case of Hamilton Bell, we are told that an interesting account appears in *Kay's Portraits* of how for a bet he carried a vintner's boy on his back from Edinburgh to Musselburgh; and in the case of John Bell of Greenhill we learn that he was drowned while bathing in the Kirtle on 9th September, 1776.

In this new Register, the entries for members who died before publication of the 1936 History have been reprinted with only very occasional alterations or additions. For those members alive in 1936 and for all subsequent intrants a questionnaire was sent out in April 1974 either to themselves or to relatives, inviting the submission of personal details. From these answers there has been compiled the entries since 1936 and these take their place in the alphabetical sequence, up to the last diet of admission in December 1981. Unfortunately, rather a long time has elapsed since replies to the questionnaire were received. Although every endeavour had been made to amend entries to take account of subsequent events, where known, the information in a few of the entries may be found to be out of date. This is regrettable but for a variety of reasons it has been impossible to publish this volume any sooner.

The 1890 History contains an extended historical introduction running to 126 pages. It is divided into chapters, the first of which, although only forty-five pages in length, provides what is still the longest and most useful general history of the Society. It is particularly informative about the early origins of the Society and in showing how a sense of community and brotherhood evolved out of the possession of common skills and the sharing of common interests. As a chronological account, it is rather unbalanced, the last two centuries before the publication date of 1890 being dealt with in a mere four pages of text and being confined to the picking out of bits and pieces, sometimes trivial, from the Society's Minutes.

This first chapter also deals with a variety of topics under separate headings: the office of the Deputy Keeper; former meeting places of the Society; regulations relating to apprentices and intrants; gowns worn by members; "the box" or common fund in relation to the early finances of the Society; the chair of humanity at Edinburgh University; the Society's involvement with public works and charities; a very brief notice of the element of heredity in the Society's membership; the Society's armorial bearings; and the Society's relationship with the notaries public. The remaining chapters of the 1890 introduction deal with the Library, the Society's finances, the establishment and history of the Widows' Fund, and a very interesting account of the long fight to establish a chair of conveyancing at Edinburgh University under the patronage of the Society in the face of opposition by the Faculty of Advocates.

In 1933, the Society agreed to issue a continuation of the 1890 History and the task was entrusted to a committee set up under the convenership of A. P. Melville. This resulted in the 1936 History, which contains some forty pages of introductory material and a further fifty pages comprising "The Early History of the Scottish Signet" by Professor R. K. Hannay, H.M. Historiographer for Scotland. Professor Hannay's detailed and scholarly article traces the use of the Scottish Signet from earliest times to the end of the sixteenth century, concluding with the granting of the Commission in 1594, the year in which the Society's

formal Minutes begin. It is a distinguished contribution to the history of the origins of the Society.

The introduction to the 1936 History begins with a short outline of the establishment of the Society and goes on to cover in brief the main events since 1890, including service in the 1914-18 war, developments in the Library, and the erection of the West Wing. The Widows' Fund and the various charitable and educational trusts are also dealt with. The setting up of the General Council of Solicitors in Scotland is alluded to, as is the decision of the Society to establish a Council of its own, which met first in 1934.

A feature of both 1890 and 1936 volumes are the Abstracts of Minutes. These form a major part of the earlier work—almost 250 pages—beginning with a complete account of the Commission granted in 1594. Thereafter, there are notes on events for nearly every year until 1887. A narrative selecting the more important and interesting forms part of the 1890 introduction. Most entries are short and factual such as those recording admissions, but others occur in more detail, e.g. a copy of the “Memoriall concerning the rise and constitution of the Society” in 1731 occupying almost six pages. Other entries relate to the happenings of the day, highlighting events of note or that caused concern. In 1767, the Deputy Keeper called members to a meeting “in order to lay before them the wicked incendiary letters sent to my lord president”, and he observed, “I humbly think we are called upon to express in the most publick manner our highest indignation of the malicious authors of that hellish performance”.⁴ The meeting resolved to offer a reward of 300 guineas, upon conviction, to any person able to discover the author—to be raised by imposing a tax on Signet Letters!

Affairs of both local and national importance occupied the Society much and from time to time financial contributions were made, occasionally quite substantial sums. An instance took place in 1798 when it was unanimously decided to subscribe 2,000 guineas (not 200, as stated in the 1890 History at p. xxxvii) towards the support of the state “at the present crisis of affairs”, presumably referring to the unrest in Ireland at the time. In 1811, 700 guineas were voted towards the erection of a marble statue to the late Lord President Blair;⁵ and frequent sums were given towards the restoration or upkeep of St Giles.

These Abstracts of Minutes give a useful outline of the Society's affairs over the years, but there was no further significant contribution to the history of the Society until 1970, when Dr A. R. B. Haldane contributed an article about the Society for publication in the *Journal of the Law Society of Scotland*.⁶ This was, and still is, the only succinct and balanced account of the Society's origins and its subsequent expansion. By kind permission of Dr Haldane, it is reproduced below, with a few amendments to bring it up to date.

The story of the Society of Writers to the Signet begins far back in the history of Scotland. Many centuries ago when the art of writing was little more than a mystery known to a few, but at a period when the authority of the King was at length growing from shadow to substance, the method of authentication of documents carrying the King's warrant and approval presented a growing problem. Its solution was found

4. 1890 History, p.405.

5. The statue is located in Parliament House.

6. “The Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet” by A. R. B. Haldane, C.B.E., D.Litt., W.S., in *Journal of the Law Society of Scotland*, Vol. 15, 1970, pp.35-38. A slightly shortened account appeared as an introduction to *The Signet Library*, by G. H. Ballantyne, published in 1979.

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to be in the use of seals, bearing special devices embossed on them, to be attached to documents in evidence of Royal approval, and with or without any signature. As time passed and the number of documents calling for authentication increased, it was found that one seal only was insufficient and it is known that at least by the fourteenth century, if not earlier, the number of seals in use had grown to four. These seals differed in character and design according to the special purpose for which each was used, but one, known as "The Signet," was reserved for the private communications of the King himself or for the authentication of documents in which he was closely concerned or interested. The earliest recorded use of the Signet was in the year 1369.

With multiplication and growing use of seals came the need for officials and staff to supervise such use. Particularly was this apparent in the case of the Signet, the custody of which came to be entrusted to a high Court official known as the King's Secretary. His office was an important and busy one calling for the employment of clerks, discreet, trustworthy and skilled in the still rare art of writing, whose business it was to attend to the public and private correspondence of the King himself and to execute documents such as Royal Charters and Grants issued by the King's authority. Originally these clerks appear to have lacked any corporate entity other than that inherent in a community of calling, but there is evidence that before the end of the fifteenth century a body united by common interests had in fact come into being. At a time when men "wrote with difficulty and spelled by chance" it is hardly surprising to find these clerks referred to first as "Writaries to the Singnet" and slightly later as "Wrettaries to the Signet." Though still lacking any formal corporate existence or constitution these early Writers to the Signet, sharing a knowledge of law and conveyancing, the rare art of penmanship and the still rarer skill in the use of Latin, had much in common with the Guilds linked by the knowledge of trade and craft.

In 1532 James V brought about a major reform of the legal administration of Scotland by the establishment of the College of Justice. With this reform there came into being the Court of Session, superseding the Lords of Council, Lords Auditor and the other ancient Courts which had hitherto possessed limited or specialised jurisdiction. To these old Courts the Writers to the Signet had acted as clerks for some time before 1532, and now as a component part of the College of Justice they came to act in the same capacity in relation to the new Court of Session. The establishment of the College of Justice and the Court of Session had left in being the old Privy Council, which continued to deal with criminal and civil complaints brought by or against persons of high or low degree in all parts of Scotland. To the

Council, sitting in private session originally in the Council Chamber of the Old Tolbooth, Writers to the Signet, as they were increasingly coming to be called, had from early times acted as clerks. After 1532 they continued so to act, and the growing number of cases recorded in the many volumes of the Register of the Council from 1545 up till 1689 can leave no doubt in the mind of the reader that here, too, the Writers to the Signet found busy, useful and no doubt profitable occupation. By this time, too, it seems increasingly evident that besides acting as clerks to the Council, many of the writers were coming to transact business on behalf of persons appearing as litigants before the Council and the Court of Session, or in more private capacities.

In May 1532 immediately following the establishment of the College of Justice by James V, the first Act of Sederunt of the new Court of Session made regulations for the work of Writers or "Clerkis to the Signet." These were aimed at securing the diligence and confidentiality of a body which was coming increasingly to be recognised as a necessary and responsible part of the legal system of Scotland. The same regulations laid down scales of charges which could properly be levied by them for official work in connection with the Court of Session, the Privy Council or for such other work more directly on behalf of the Crown as they continued to carry out.

The earliest minutes of the Society of Writers to the Signet which have survived date from 1594. In that year Sir Robert Cockburn of Clerkington, Lord Secretary to the King and as such Keeper of the King's Signet, granted to John Layng as Deputy Keeper of the Signet and to eighteen other writers the first Commission conferring on them official status for their work as clerks to the Courts. Rules for the qualification and admission of Writers to the Signet were laid down. Provision was made for the remedying, by the Deputy Keeper and certain senior members, of abuses which might occur within the body, while vacancies among the first Commissioners were to be filled from the other most senior and best qualified members. Admission of new members, though virtually in the hands of the Deputy Keeper and Commissioners, still remained, at least in theory, in those of the Lord Secretary.

The regulations laid down in 1594 and subsequent communications from the Lord Secretary during the next half century emphasise the importance attached to the maintenance of the high standards of work and integrity demanded from members of the Society. For this purpose strict limitation in the membership was recognised as being of first importance for the public benefit, increase in members being seen as likely to lead to decrease in earnings and so to increased temptation "to committ falsettis." Sons, apprentices, or even servants of

members might be admitted, but only on the death of a member, while the total number as laid down in 1594 was restricted to twenty-four. A letter dated 1609 for Sir Alexander Hay, then Lord Secretary, refers to anxiety over the "multitude of wrytaries to the Signet," with an exhortation to the Deputy Keeper of the Signet and Commissioners to "Lett not preposterous pitie heirefter move ather you or thame to spair or mitigate the punishment imposed, that so quhome diewtie can not move feare sall inforce to walk warlie in their calling." No doubt happenings within the Society about this time justified these recurrent warnings aimed at those who stepped outside the bounds of proper professional behaviour, for during the first half of the seventeenth century references appear to the impropriety of drinking at taverns during sessions of the Court, failure to keep a true register of apprentices and servants with a record of their signatures, transacting business on terms other than those approved or acting as clerks to craft guilds in the City. It is on record that one member had even so far lowered the status of himself and the Society as to take employment as a waiter in Kirkcaldy, a monstrous iniquity which cost him his membership of the Society. At this time, too, many references appear to repeated efforts to maintain the standard demanded of entrants to the Society and to the tests of knowledge and qualification. How far these efforts were successful seems doubtful, for numbers continued to grow, a tendency which was perhaps not unconnected with the fact that payments by entrants seem, in theory if not always in practice, to have been a perquisite of the Lord Secretary who as Keeper of the Signet had the final say in admission.

The Society suffered its full share of the confusion which the Civil War brought to so much of the administration of Scotland and England alike, but emerged with the Restoration in 1660 under a new Deputy Keeper of the Signet and a membership purged of many officials and others whose appointments dated from the Commonwealth period. Restriction of the size of the Society was still a prime object, and in 1663 the Earl of Lauderdale, as Keeper of the Signet, undertook that the number of members should be limited to sixty. The Revolution of 1688 brought a further brief period of confusion, during which for a short time the work of the Signet Office was in abeyance, but with the new Monarchy firmly in the saddle the position of the Society as an integral part of the Establishment grew firmer year by year. In 1696 the Society entered into what was described as a "bond of association" in support of William III, and the Treaty of Union of 1707 provided that vacancies in the Court of Session could be filled only by advocates or Writers to the Signet. The Rebellion of 1715 appears to have given rise to some anxiety as to the political leanings of some of

the members, for in November of that year they were warned not to take into their Chambers as apprentices or servants any not well disposed to the Government. This warning did not, however, deter one member from fighting for the Chevalier, at Sheriffmuir, while thirty years later another fought for Prince Charles Edward at Prestonpans. Whether, in the years which followed, glasses were sometimes raised in the privacy of Chambers to the King over the Water can never be known, for the minutes contain no hint. Instead, the records show the Society more and more firmly adhering to Crown and Parliament. An address of congratulation, jointly made to the Duke of Cumberland after Culloden by the Society and Lords of Session, was followed over the next half century by both resolutions and contributions by the Society in support of the Government during the American and French Wars, and in 1778 a sum of 500 gns. was contributed towards the raising in Edinburgh of a regiment for overseas. Meantime one important change closely affecting the Society had taken place. In 1746 the ancient office of Lord Secretary was abolished, and since the holder of the Secretaryship was also Keeper of the Signet, the latter office fell vacant. For some years thereafter the Keepership of the Signet was filled by special appointment, but in 1817 this office was combined with that of Lord Clerk Register. The position has remained unchanged up to the present day, the office of Lord Clerk Register being today filled by the Earl of Wemyss and March, K.T. who, in virtue of his position as Keeper of the Signet, is responsible for the work of the Signet Office.

As the years rolled on the membership of the Society grew, at first slowly but later with increasing speed. The efforts made in the earliest years to limit the number of entrants "for the benefit of the public" were never wholly successful. As late as the first year of the Protectorate the membership was still limited to as few as thirty-six, but by 1731 this had grown to 110, "to the great loss of the whole body, for half the members could not possibly live upon their incomes and hence a larger proportion of aged and infirm brethren was brought to depend upon the Society's funds for maintenance." Throughout the eighteenth century the roll of members steadily lengthened, perhaps reflecting both the rise in the level of qualification and the suitability of those seeking admission, and the steady increase in the financial strength of the Society. In the first years of the nineteenth century, following the inauguration in 1803 of the Widows' Fund, the number had grown to 200 thereafter rising to a peak of 685 in 1840 and falling again in the second half of the century. Today the membership numbers just over 800.

Such in brief and bare outline is the story of this ancient body, sketched with a line, faint but continuous and clearly

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discernible in the very earliest years, growing in strength and certainty as the centuries pass. But looking back over the long period of the Society's existence and turning the pages of the written records of nearly 400 years, it becomes apparent how abundant is the detail and the colour which even in a short compass may enable us to bring to the eye of the imagination a picture of the men who went before us, the work they did and the surroundings in which they moved. At the time when the earliest "Writtaris to the Signet" began to emerge as professional men from the historical obscurity of the fourteenth century they had, as has been seen, no corporate entity. It is equally clear that they had nothing approaching regular places of business. Even the King's Secretary, in common with other public servants of the time, had no official place of business and it is very certain that his clerks would be no better situated. The work of the King's Secretary and of his clerks for long continued to be done in their own homes, though in the case of the latter, references begin to appear as time passed to "writing booths." The nature and extent of these must be a matter for speculation, but it needs small imagination to realise their necessity when it is recalled that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and indeed for more than 200 years to come, the dwelling places of the citizens of Edinburgh were situated in tall tenements housing on successive floors rich and poor indiscriminately intermixed, living in only slightly varying degrees of squalor, and that till the middle of the eighteenth century the dwellings of even the richest and most aristocratic might contain only three rooms. It would be fascinating indeed to picture, were it possible, the circumstances and the surroundings in which many of the documents of the time, drafted and engrossed by our professional predecessors, first saw the light of day. Till past the middle of the eighteenth century the life and activity of Edinburgh was virtually confined to the Old Town lying between the Castle and Holyroodhouse, but following the adoption in 1765 of James Craig's imaginative plan for development of the city to the north, linked to the Old Town by the North Bridge and the Mound, the New Town grew rapidly. None took fuller and quicker advantage of the improved housing than the lawyers and by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century Writers to the Signet and advocates were living and working in George Street, Queen Street and Heriot Row which with the intervening streets, and especially Charlotte Square, were later to become the centre of the legal life of the city.

The same absence of office accommodation which must have tried so sorely our predecessors applied to the Society as a body in its early years, and its meeting places as recorded in the earliest minutes from 1594 vary in character and no doubt in

quality. In 1596 they meet in "the new Kirk" and in the early years of the seventeenth century in the "Laiche" or the "Heiche" Tolbooth. In 1607 they are recorded as meeting in Holyroodhouse, but often in the dwelling house or "Writing Chalmer" of one of their members. A little later appear references to meetings in the "Signet Chalmer" or the "auld session" house, which appear to have been in the Tolbooth; but by 1648 meetings were being held in the session house of the newly-built Parliament House. In the last years of the century the need for premises to house the Signet office and to provide a regular meeting place for the Society had become imperative, and by 1696 the Society had acquired a "new lodging" in what came to be known as "Writer's Court" on the north side of the High Street opposite the Luckenbooths and St Giles' Church. Here were to be the premises of the Society until 1815 when, on the reconstruction of the buildings in Parliament Square to house the courts, accommodation was provided for the Society in what is now the Lower Hall of the Signet Library, the Signet Office moving in 1826 to the Register House and in September 1960 to Parliament House.

From a very early stage in the history of the Society those responsible for its standing and well-being had been faced with two major and allied problems, firstly to limit the number of members to the extent necessary to ensure a reasonable income for those admitted, and secondly to make provision for colleagues or their dependants who fell on evil times. The first rules of the Society served the double purpose of maintaining professional standards and building up a common fund, providing as they did for fines for non-attendance at meetings or even at funerals of colleagues or for lapses in professional conduct. These payments all went into the "box" representing the Common Fund, and here too went the payments from apprentices and entrants, varying in amount but gradually increasing as time passed, and soon to become a valuable source of income. For very many years after the formal constitution of the Society in 1594 the details of its finances must be largely a matter for conjecture. The details of the Society's sources of income whether from fines or dues cannot be known with any certainty, a lack of certainty which is accentuated during that period in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when for a time money transactions in Scotland were expressed with little discrimination in terms of Scots or English currency. It is clear that for much more than 100 years from its inception the calls on the Common Fund were almost exclusively for the support of old or infirm members or their widows, but in 1695 the acquisition of the property in Writers' Court for the Society's meetings meant a further substantial burden on its resources. While the payments to widows seem to have been

regular and not ungenerous, fore-shadowing the establishment of a separate Widows' Fund in 1803, it is equally clear that well before the middle of the eighteenth century the Society was making substantial donations to charitable and other objects in Edinburgh and elsewhere. Three payments in 1738 go respectively towards the building of the Royal Infirmary, the erection of an observatory for the University and the establishment of an orphan hospital. In 1760 the Burgh of Kinghorn in Fife gets, somewhat surprisingly, a contribution towards the cost of a harbour at Pettycur. Eight years later another goes towards the erection of a church for Gaelic speakers in Edinburgh, while in 1751 a sum of 500 gns. had been given towards a scheme for rebuilding ruinous houses in the capital. The accounts for the next 100 years show a steady increase in the Society's funds and further substantial payments for charitable, religious and educational objects. The list is long and varied, reflecting the wide interests of the Society and its members.

From an early date the knowledge and practice of the art of the conveyancer was looked on by the Society as falling peculiarly within its province and responsibility. As early as the middle of the eighteenth century proposals were put forward by Mr John Mackenzie, w.s., of Delvine for regular instruction in conveyancing, in addition to that received by apprentices in the ordinary course of apprenticeship. The proposals met originally with some opposition, but this was soon overcome and during the last quarter of the century lectures on conveyancing were being regularly given to apprentices by members of the Society. By 1796, the feeling had grown that the importance of conveyancing as a part of legal education called for the establishment of a Chair in the University of Edinburgh. This, too, met with considerable opposition both from the courts and from the Town Council of Edinburgh, and it was not till the end of 1824 that a Chair endowed by the Society was finally established with Mr Macvey Napier, Librarian of the Signet Library, as the first professor. Up to and including the present time the professor has always been a member of the Society.

But far exceeding pensions to widows or donations to educational or charitable objects, those responsible for the finances of the Society have since the first quarter of the eighteenth century been confronted with what has come to be probably the greatest source of pride and almost certainly the most complex problem in the history of the Society. On 12th November 1722 the Society resolved that all Acts of Parliament passed before and after the Union and all Scots law books in print and others as they came out should be purchased for the use of members. The Scots law books then in existence are believed to have numbered sixty. At that time no separate

library fund existed, but it soon became evident that some new source of revenue for book purchase must be found. The plan which was decided on in 1755 was ingenious. For some time past it had been the custom for entrants to the Society to give entertainments in celebration of their admission. These parties appear to have resulted in what the Commissioners regarded as unseemly behaviour on the part of those present. Such parties were for the future banned, but in view of the saving in expense thus secured to entrants, a payment of £3 from each for purchase of books was imposed, while a fine of 5 gns. on any member attending an entertainment of the sort was to be similarly used. A few years later the payment due by entrants was raised to £10, and as the number of men entering on apprenticeship each year at this time was about forty, this source of revenue was coming to be substantial.

But the ambitions of those responsible for library policy were almost boundless. A proposal for some degree of merger with the Advocates' Library in 1740 had fallen through. Now in 1778 the Society resolved to form a general library on a large scale, collecting for the purpose the best books in every department of literature, and by 1792 the library contained some 3,000 volumes. From now on the growth of the Signet Library to a great extent reflected the interests and genius of a continuous line of outstanding librarians, and no less the interests and generosity of very many members of the Society. Its growth during the first quarter of last century was remarkable, the average sums spent each year on books and binding rising from about £500 between 1808 and 1814 to £1,155 between 1815 and 1822, with a peak of nearly £2,000 in 1824. In 1837 when the librarian, Mr Macvey Napier, himself a Writer to the Signet, retired, he described the library, by then containing over 30,000 volumes, as "one of the choicest and most valuable repositories of learning this part of the Island possesses." During the last 100 years and more the annual expenditure on purchase of books has fluctuated widely reflecting largely the intake of members to the Society, but despite this the size and importance of the library has steadily increased and very many valuable acquisitions have been added whether by purchase or by gift. Though the Signet Library has never been in any sense a public library, the Society has throughout adopted a most generous and liberal policy in making its books available for reference to researchers and writers. Many a writer and student up to the present day has had reason to be grateful to the Society and to those dedicated and kindly men whose life and work has been devoted to the care of the books in their keeping.

For nearly 100 years from the start of the library in 1722 no special accommodation for the books existed. For over fifty years the growing collection was housed in the Society's

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premises in Writers' Court, and although in 1782, due partly to the efforts of Mr Walter Scott, father of the future "Author of Waverley," these premises were enlarged, the accommodation for books remained quite inadequate. Finally, the acquisition in 1815 of the Lower Hall in the Parliament Square buildings, already mentioned, went far to solve the problem, while in 1833 the Upper Hall which had been built by the advocates was acquired from the Faculty. Here in these two magnificent halls, designed by William Stark and Robert Reid in the classical style which characterises many of the finest buildings of modern Edinburgh, is housed the Law Library of the Society, its important collection of Scottish books, and a not insignificant residue of what once constituted one of the outstanding general libraries in the British Isles.⁷

Looking back on the early history of this ancient Society it seems certain that among those who first acted as clerks in the office of the King's Signet must have been many possessing skills and interests uncommon at the times in which they lived. Turning today the pages which record the names and such detail as have survived of past members of the Society from the sixteenth century up to recent times it is apparent that variety of knowledge and interests has throughout persisted, a catholicity of taste which shows itself nowhere more than in the wide scope of the library. An early link with the world of letters was forged when at the end of the fifteenth century Walter Chepman, the first to be formally designated as a "Writer to the King's Signet," was the founder of Scottish printing, working under a patent of monopoly of James IV in a printing office in the Cowgate, and from his time forward the list contains the names of very many who were patrons or practitioners of the literary and other arts. The early years of the eighteenth century saw James Anderson, w.s., Postmaster General for Scotland. A century later James Hope from his office in the New Town was working with Thomas Telford on the great task of road and canal building in the Highlands, completed between 1803 and 1823. The roll of members records the admission in 1835 of William Ayton, later to be the author of *Lays of the Scottish Cavaliers*, while greatest of all, Sir Walter Scott served his apprenticeship as a Writer to the Signet before turning to the Bar and the Courts. These are but a handful of names from among many prominent in law, letters and many other spheres. As the years passed, Edinburgh was growing to be the centre of both the legal and cultural life of the country. At the end of the eighteenth century and for very many years to come, nearly all the landed proprietors in Scotland had legal advisers in Edinburgh, Writers to the Signet for the most part, who made

7. A detailed history of the Library is contained in *The Signet Library, Edinburgh, and its Librarians, 1722-1972* by G. H. Ballantyne, published by the Scottish Library Association in 1979.

their wills and their complex family trusts, arranged the heritable bonds which were then almost the sole means of investment or estate financing, and guided through the courts the lengthy and involved lawsuits without which, it almost seemed, no gentleman's estate would be complete. For the legal profession, the turn of the century was a notable time; but literature and litigation went almost hand in hand in an age when each was in its glory, and to the Parliament House came litigants and men of letters, men like Scott, Lockhart, Cockburn, Jeffrey and Brougham, who would be no less at home in the courts than in the Signet Library, where each year saw the laying up of more and more volumes reflecting many sides of the cultural life both of Scotland and of the world beyond.

The Society recently has, like all else in our modern world, undergone great changes. For one looking back over the 500 years of its existence it may well seem that the greatest and most rapid of these have come in the century and a half which separates us from the early nineteenth century when great figures walked our streets and when the legal, literary and artistic life of Scotland centred on Edinburgh was in its prime. Modern life and modern conditions seem to have taken much of the colour from a drab and uniform world, and much of the character and personality from us and our fellows. But of this we are far too close to events to form a true judgment. Those who come after us will be better able to assess the true nature and value of the changes which for better or for worse, are taking place today; and it may be that those whom we see as the ordinary and undistinguished fellows of today will in retrospect appear as the characters and personalities of tomorrow. Whether in their own right or as members of an old and respected body, Writers to the Signet play a prominent part in banking, insurance, finance and other spheres. The Society is fully represented on many educational and charitable trusts not a few of them set up by former members of the Society. Interest in the Arts and the world of Letters still lives on, while in the honourable profession of the Law the Society prides itself on the maintenance of those high standards of work and integrity which was the aim and the achievement of those who went before.

The greatest change in recent years concerns the Library. By the beginning of this century it had become probably the finest private library in Scotland, with some 100,000 volumes. But after the 1914-18 war, various considerations, not least financial, lessened the scope and intake of titles, and by the 1950s it had become evident that the Society could no longer afford—nor indeed did it require—to keep up and maintain such a large collection of books as 150,000, the figure to which it had grown. Accordingly, a policy of reduction was drawn up under the guidance of Dr Haldane and in 1959/60 some 14,000 volumes were sold by

Sotheby's in London. Further minor sales took place in Edinburgh so that, together with other disposals during 1958-64, about 27,000 books and 9,000 pamphlets were disposed of, realising a net sum of some £167,000.

The future of the remaining books seemed assured for a time, but by 1976 it was obvious that inflation was having a grave effect on the Society's finances. Therefore, it was decided to reduce the stock further and that the Library should become "a first-rate legal and reference library, incorporating a general library of books of Scottish interest". As a result, Sotheby's held two sales in the Upper Library in April 1978 and March 1979, when approximately 54,000 volumes were auctioned for a net sum of £716,000. Prior to these auctions, arrangements were made to give the National Library of Scotland an opportunity to purchase at valuation any books which it might wish to have, as a result of which it acquired about 1,500 volumes at a total valuation figure of £40,000. In addition the National Library received a donation of 2,500 volumes of valuation rolls and also a deposit on loan of the Society's interesting collection of old maps and charts.

There now remain about 63,000 books, divided into approximately 30,000 legal books, 20,000 Scottish books, 4,000 older works of fiction, 3,500 antiquarian works, and a mixture of 5,500 bibliographical, biographical, reference and general works and pamphlets. The Lower Library is devoted mostly to legal books with the Upper Library housing the greater part of the Scottish material, including biography and genealogy, along with the antiquarian and fiction sections. The basement holds such special collections as periodicals, session papers, parliamentary papers, civil law books, etc., while the Commissioners' Room houses the Roughead Collection on trials and older sets of encyclopaedias. A home reading section is maintained in the Lower Library which includes a small but interesting selection of the latest titles on biography, travel and history, including of course many Scottish books.

Following the 1959/60 sales, most of the Library at ground and upper floor levels was redecorated and recarpeted. After the second series of sales, the basement was completely reorganised. Mobile shelving was installed in the magazine room, the former map room was converted into a consultation room—named the Napier Room—and the various cellars and book stores were refurbished. The coffee room was refurnished and named the Laing Room and the corridor was decorated and carpeted. The heating system, which since 1962 had been connected to that of Parliament House, was converted to gas and designed to run as an independent unit. At ground level, the main vestibule was upgraded and the apartments at the west end were redecorated, in particular the Deputy Keeper's Room, now known as the Minto Room. Externally, the closure of Parliament Square West ('County Square') to vehicles toward the end of 1975 was followed by a complete renovation of the area in 1977-1978, with the result that this part of the Royal Mile is now much more in keeping with its historical background.

After disposal of over 50,000 volumes, it became possible to vacate the West Wing of the Library which had been acquired in 1904 as extra storage space. Ownership has been retained but the premises have been leased to Faculty Services Limited who have converted the lower two flats into office accommodation and set aside the upper two flats for storage of overflow books from the Advocates' Library.

The 1936 History referred to the appointment of Dr C. A. Malcolm during the previous year as Librarian. He had already established his reputation as a scholar, particularly in the study of Old Edinburgh, and he continued to carry out research and to write, broadcast and lecture in this field throughout his period in office. He died in April 1961, aged 85, and was succeeded by the First Assistant, Mr J. A. Christie, who had already served for almost fifty years. About the same time, Mr S. A. F. Easterbrook, W.S., was appointed and he continued

to act as First Assistant until 1981. Mr Christie retired in 1968 as Librarian when his place was taken by Mr G. H. Ballantyne, the present Librarian. During the period of the reorganisation of the Library, 1977-80, Mrs C. J. McWilliam joined the staff as an additional assistant. She was succeeded by Mrs J. C. Penney who has now assumed Mr Easterbrook's responsibilities.

The Upper Library was seldom used until the early 1970s except for the occasional Society meeting, lecture or social event, but since then the policy has been to permit fuller use by appropriate non-commercial bodies of what is one of the finest rooms in the country. A variety of events has taken place, including several series of concerts given by the Scottish Baroque Ensemble. During the Edinburgh Festival, exhibitions have been mounted and the B.B.C. has recorded recitals then and at other times. The association with the Knights of the Thistle referred to on p. xxx of the 1936 History continues, although the Knights now assemble in the Lower Library prior to their annual St Andrew's Day service in the Thistle Chapel of the High Kirk of St Giles. Similarly, on the occasion of the investiture of a new Knight, H.M. the Queen and H.R.H. Prince Philip assemble with the Knights in, and return to, the Lower Library. The Commissioners' Room is used for arbitrations, meetings and small dinner parties. The newly refurbished Napier and Minto Rooms are available to all members for consultations and meetings.

Looking to the future, the advent of legal information retrieval by computer is in time bound to revolutionise research techniques, both in office and library. It is too early yet, especially as changes and refinements are so rapid, to predict what effect these developments will have on the Signet Library, but it seems certain that the computer will have a part to play in its day-to-day operations. In turn, this may call into question the provision and storage of legal literature and information in the whole of Parliament House, with consequent changes.

As well as the Library, the Society itself has undergone significant changes in recent times. These were foreshadowed in the 1936 History with the brief references to the setting up in 1922 of a body to represent practising solicitors in Scotland called the Joint Committee of Legal Societies in Scotland, whose members were appointed by representatives of the six largest societies (including the W.S. Society). The Deputy Keeper of the Signet was *ex officio* Chairman of this Committee. Sir George M. Paul acted as Chairman from 1922 to 1925, Sir William Campbell Johnston from 1925 to 1935 and Sir Ernest Wedderburn from 1935 to 1949, when the Committee ceased to function. As a result of the activities of this Committee there was introduced into Parliament and duly passed, the Solicitors (Scotland) Act 1933, which established the General Council of Solicitors in Scotland with power to deal with the admission, education and training of solicitors. The General Council was elected by constituencies consisting of individual legal societies (including the W.S. Society) and groups of smaller societies. Sir William Campbell Johnston acted as Chairman of the General Council from 1934 to 1935 and Sir Ernest Wedderburn from 1935 to 1949 when its duties were transferred to the Law Society of Scotland. Professional opinion generally favoured the establishment of a council with powers to regulate all professional matters and with this object in view a Bill prepared by the General Council was introduced in Parliament in 1938 but no progress was made in that session. The Bill was re-introduced during the next session and made substantial progress but subsequently had to be dropped because of the national emergency. After the 1939-45 war, steps were taken to resuscitate the Bill. To facilitate its passage through Parliament and to save Parliamentary time, the Bill was combined with the Legal Aid (Scotland) Bill and ultimately became law under the title of the Legal Aid and Solicitors (Scotland) Act 1949. The part of the Act which related to and established the Law Society of Scotland was cited separately as the Solicitors (Scotland) Act 1949.

The Law Society came into existence on the passing of the Act, and Mr R. B. Laurie, w.s., was appointed Secretary. He had already acted as Secretary to the General Council from 1946 to 1949, having the use of two rooms in the Signet Library. Upon formation of the new Society, premises were obtained in North Bank Street. Sir Ernest Wedderburn became the first President of the Law Society and during his term of office from 1949 to 1950 he was much involved in drafting its Constitution.

The Joint Committee of Legal Societies in Scotland continued in being for some considerable time after formation of the General Council of Solicitors in 1933 in order to deal with matters outside the scope of the General Council. When the Law Society of Scotland took the place of the General Council, the old Joint Committee no longer had a role, but it was felt that there were matters of special interest to Solicitors practising in Edinburgh which should be discussed by a representative body.

On 19th January 1951 a new Joint Committee of Legal Societies in Edinburgh and Midlothian was formed upon which serve representatives of each of the W.S. Society, the S.S.C. Society and the Society of Procurators of Midlothian. The Office-Bearers of the Committee are the Chairman, who is the Deputy Keeper *ex officio*, and the Secretary, who is the Clerk to the W.S. Society *ex officio*. This Joint Committee meets regularly and continues to make an active and vigorous contribution, particularly on matters affecting Court of Session procedure. The Principal Clerk of Session and the Deputy Principal Clerk of Session attend meetings of the Committee by invitation.

It can be seen, therefore, that the role played by the W.S. Society—or more specifically the role played by the Deputy Keepers who held office between 1922 and 1949—was prominent in the development of affairs leading up to establishment of the Law Society of Scotland. Since that time the office of Deputy Keeper has diminished in importance in relation to matters outside the affairs of the W.S. Society itself; but it may be mentioned that of the 20 Presidents of the Law Society of Scotland who have served between 1949 and 1982, eight have been members of the W.S. Society. The two Societies have always maintained a close liaison, and the younger one frequently holds both social and educational meetings in the Signet Library.

Within the compass of this short introduction it is possible to note but briefly some of the other developments and events which have affected the Society since 1936.

The 1936 History, at page xix, tells of the Memorial erected in honour of those Members and Apprentices who fell in the 1914-18 war. On 30th November 1950, a marble tablet to the memory of the twenty-five Members and Apprentices who died during the Second World War was unveiled by Lord Elphinstone. This tablet, placed beside the others at the west end of the Lower Library, bears the following names:—

Members

ARTHUR NICOL BRUCE
JAMES BLACK CAMERON D.S.O.
JOHN RONALD CAMERON
DAVID EDWARD FERGUS COATES
ALAN ARCHIBALD COWAN
JOHN PATRICK EASON M.B.E.
JOHN RENSHAW GIFFORD
HAROLD DANVERS GILROY
ARTHUR HOOD JAMES
HAROLD KENNEDY MACDONALD

IAN DRUMMOND MACKENZIE
EDWARD FRANCIS ALLARDYCE MORRISON
COLIN ARTHUR PATTULLO M.C.
ERNEST ALEXANDER MACLAGAN WEDDERBURN

Apprentices
GEORGE HOLMES GALLIE M.C.
COLIN ROSS HUNTER
DAVID AUGUSTUS JAMES LEITH-BUCHANAN
DENIS HERIOT ORROCK
HAROLD GRAHAM ROBERTSON
WILLIAM GORDON THOMSON
JAMES GORDON THORBURN
WILLIAM IAN EDWARD THORBURN
JOHN LAURENCE STUART WATSON
WILLIAM KENNETH MACFARLANE WEIR
GEORGE BERTRAM MURE WOOD

Responsibility for the Signet Office never, strictly speaking, rested with the Society as such, but with the Keeper of the Signet and the officials holding commissions under him. Until 1976, such commissions were held only by the Substitute Keeper and Clerk, the Extractor and Assistant Clerks of the Society, and these officials conducted the business of the Signet Office. By 1975 the number of summonses passing the Signet in each year was of the order of 13,000 as compared with 5-6,000 some ten years earlier, and it became apparent that there would be advantage in combining the process of signetting a Summons with that of registration of the cause in the offices of the Court. Consequently the Keeper, in 1976, granted a commission in favour of the Principal Clerk of Session authorising him, by himself or his deputies, to seal writs in use to pass the Signet. This was the first time a commission was granted for this specific purpose in favour of a person other than a Writer, or Clerk, to the Signet. The commission was, however, in addition, and without prejudice, to the commissions in the existing wider terms held by the Substitute Keeper and Clerk, whose office dates back to 1594, and by the Assistant Clerk and Extractor, whose office dates back to 1711. When, in 1979, an industrial dispute regrettably disrupted the business of the Courts, summonses continued to be signetted by the Society's officials and by other members of the Society in whose favour the Keeper granted additional enabling commissions, so that in this respect, at least, the Queen's Writ continued to run.

At a Stated Meeting of the Society held on 5th April 1976, approval was given to the admission of women members, and on 6th December of that year Miss Patricia Stuart was welcomed into membership of the Society as the first woman intrant. At 30th April 1982, the total number of members was 797 of whom twenty-six were women and 386 were Commissioners. The Commissioners are senior members of the Society appointed by the Keeper on the advice of the Deputy Keeper. They are responsible for all matters of discipline affecting members of the Society and a prospective intrant to membership of the Society requires to be nominated by at least one Commissioner. In each year since 1962, the number of members has increased, and in 1976 the total membership passed the previous peak of 685, established as long ago as 1840 when that number must have constituted a much larger

proportion of the total solicitor profession in Scotland than does the present membership. It is present policy that growth of membership over the years should be encouraged, but at a more modest rate than has been seen in recent years.

When the plans of the Law Society were settled for introduction of the Diploma in Legal Practice, followed by in-office training on a training contract, it became necessary to review the Society's procedure for admission of intrants. The old procedure governing W.S. indentures had in any event become cumbersome and rather meaningless in modern conditions, and much thought was given to the form of an alternative procedure for admission which would, on the one hand, be simplified and modernised yet, on the other hand, take full account of the historical status and tradition of the Society whose members hold a commission from the Keeper, the Queen's representative. In 1979, a new procedure was approved by the Society whereby a prospective intrant who holds or is entitled to hold a full practising certificate from the Law Society of Scotland may be nominated for admission on the petition of three members, of whom at least one must be a Commissioner, and (except in special circumstances) at least one of the petitioners must be a person who has employed, or been in partnership with, the prospective intrant for a period of not less than two years. Each prospective intrant is interviewed by a panel of Commissioners who try, among other things, to ascertain what is an applicant's object in seeking membership. If approved on interview the petition then has to be supported by confidential reports from each of the three petitioning members before it is submitted to the Examiners of Intrants for final approval. The fee currently payable by intrants on admission is £500.

It became necessary to adopt new Acts and Regulations of the Society in order to provide for the altered procedures for admission, and to provide for changes in the constitution of the Council and the Committee of Curators of the Library. These were adopted at a Stated Meeting held on 28th May 1979 and the opportunity was taken to revise and modernise the Acts and Regulations in all respects. Amongst other things, a retiral age of 65 was fixed for the Office-bearers and Clerk, and provision was made for members to record their votes by post on the occasion of the election of a new Office-bearer or Clerk.

The Deputy Keeper is entitled to preside at all meetings of the Society but he is not an Office-bearer of the Society. By statute the appointment is a matter solely for the Keeper of the Signet and not for the Society. Nevertheless in 1978, at the instigation of the Deputy Keeper, a Committee of the Council under the chairmanship of the Treasurer was asked to consider (i) whether or not it would be in the best interests of the Society in future to adopt some formal or informal selection procedure before the name of any proposed Deputy Keeper was submitted to the Keeper for his consideration; and (ii) whether—by way of formal or informal arrangement—there should be a restriction on the term of office of a Deputy Keeper or any other restrictions or provisions affecting the holding of this office.

On this matter the Committee reported to the Council in the following terms:

It was finally agreed to recommend that a retiring Deputy Keeper should submit a short leet of candidates to a Committee to be chaired by himself consisting of the Treasurer, the Fiscal, two Council Members and two Society Members, the last four to be appointed by the Council, to select the person who would be recommended to the Keeper as his future Deputy. In the event of the Deputy Keeper dying in office the Treasurer, as senior Office-bearer, would carry out the functions of the retiring Deputy Keeper. It was agreed that if accepted by

Council these recommendations should be minuted but that it would not be appropriate for them to form part of the Society's Acts and Regulations.

It was also recommended that the term of office of a Deputy Keeper should be limited to ten years and that he should demit office at sixty-five or if he ceased to hold a practising certificate. Again this could not be formally regulated but should be contained in an informal document when an incoming Deputy Keeper agreed to accept the appointment.

These recommendations met with the approval of the Deputy Keeper and the Council, and they were submitted to the Keeper. The Keeper intimated that he considered the arrangements to be appropriate and they will accordingly be adopted on the next occasion on which a Deputy Keeper is to be appointed.

Following upon the sales of books, and after meeting the very substantial costs of upgrading the library premises and installing new heating plant, the Society was left with a reasonably substantial endowment fund of some £865,000, the investment of which is professionally managed. The costs of maintaining and running a building and library of the importance and scale of the Signet Library become increasingly formidable for a private society to bear, and at least eighty per cent of the Society's entire investment and subscription income is devoted to meeting these costs. A policy is currently adopted whereby there will be met out of capital funds the cost of making good the arrears of book-binding which have built up over the years as a result of financial stringency, the cost of purchasing new books which do not fall within the legal or reference or home reading categories (now a relatively small annual sum) and the cost of any *major* repair work to the Library should this at any time become necessary.

In the changed economic circumstances of the present age, the W.S. Widows' Fund—like other similar co-operative funds—can play no more than a minor role towards protecting the dependants of members. At one time the Fund could be regarded as the principal means (apart from whole of life assurance and savings) of protecting a widow and orphaned children, but this is obviously no longer so. Nevertheless in relation to the modest contributions which are charged, the Fund (now worth over £3.5 million) continues to make a worth-while contribution to the security of members' dependants. In recent years, much has been done to improve performance of the Fund by securing such taxation relief as is open to a fund of this nature and by employment of professional fund managers. An application is, at the time of writing, before Parliament for a new Provisional Order which will materially alter the provisions of the current Writers to the Signet Widows' Fund Order 1955. From this, the Fund will, as a result of admission of women members, emerge with the unfamiliar title of the "Writers to the Signet Dependents' Annuity Fund".

In recent years, the work of the Council of the Society has to a large extent been directed to internal affairs connected with the book sales and the consequent reorganisation of the Library, with upgrading the premises and leasing the West Wing, and with revising and updating the Society's procedures and regulations. In its consideration of legal topics, such as proposals for law reform, the Council does not seek to duplicate work which is more appropriately done by the various committees of the Law Society of Scotland, upon which so many members of the Society already serve. Nevertheless, if on any issue the Council of the Society takes a view differing from that of the Law Society, that view will be expressed; and whenever it is thought that some distinctive contribution can be made, the Council either

appoints an *ad hoc* committee or enlists the assistance of individual members to prepare reports and to submit views to the Scottish Law Commission or others concerned.

As it has done for centuries, the Society continues to play its part in community as well as legal affairs, and it continues to be represented on all the charitable bodies mentioned on pages xxxii *et seq* of the 1936 History, and others as well. Sadly, John Watson's School, after giving notable service to the community under the control of the Commissioners of the Signet for 148 years, had to be closed in 1975, following a decision by the then Government to phase out Government grants to grant-aided schools from session 1976/77.⁸ The school building was sold to the Crown Commissioners, the intended use being to house the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, and it became the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Scotland, under the provisions of the Education (Scotland) Acts, to make a new Scheme to regulate the Trust funds. In January 1979, the Governing Body submitted proposals for a new Scheme, and although, at the time of writing, the new Scheme has not yet been made it is expected that the Keepers and Commissioners of the Signet will continue to be the Governing Body (being, as such Governors, an incorporated body under the provisions of an Act of 1822) and that the Governing Body will delegate the detailed administration of the Trust to a Committee of Trustees appointed by them, consisting of six Writers to the Signet, two nominees of Lothian Regional Council, one nominee of the Scottish Council of Independent Schools and one nominee of the Lothian Association of Youth Clubs. The Deputy Keeper will be Chairman of the Trustees. The principal objects of the new Scheme, if it is finally approved, will be to apply up to, but not exceeding, one third of available income in awarding John Watson's Scholarships for the provision of boarding education for orphans or children of one parent families, and to apply the rest of the income for the benefit of children and young persons who are handicapped physically or mentally or by reason of social deprivation. The annual income of the Trust should exceed £68,000 so that John Watson's will continue as a substantial and important charitable trust able to do much good within an area of need akin to the area it has served for the past century and a half.

The social side has always, properly, played an important part in the corporate life of the Society. Each year a formal dinner is held to which members may invite a private guest, and on these occasions other men and women distinguished in the Law, in other professions, in business and in public affairs are entertained as guests of the Society. These dinners are usually attended by the Master and Clerk of the London Solicitors' Livery Company, with which Company the Society maintains a close and valued association, and in turn the Deputy Keeper and the Clerk are privileged to attend Company dinners in London. The three venerable dining clubs, the 1790 Signet Club, the 1808 Signet Club and the 1850 Signet Club have been joined by a robust and enthusiastic youngster, the 1977 Signet Club. Periodically a Society Ball is held in the matchless setting of the Library and in each year the Deputy Keeper, Office-bearers and Council, with others who are actively concerned in the conduct of the Society's affairs, entertain new intrants, with their guests, at a cocktail party. Many other private parties of one kind or another, involving firms or groups of members, are held within the Library premises.

The W.S. Golf Club was founded in 1957 at the instigation of Sir Hugh Watson and, at a dinner in the Library to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary, there were numbered among its guests many representatives from its regular adversaries, the Golfing Societies of the Bench and Bar, the London Solicitors, the Royal Faculty of Procurators in Glasgow, the

8. A history of John Watson's School written by Miss Isobel Wallis is shortly to be published under the auspices of the John Watson's F.P. Club.

Society of Advocates in Aberdeen and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors in Edinburgh.

Within the scope of a short introduction such as this it is not possible to present more than a brief sketch of the Society's long history and the many activities of its members, past and present. The 1890 and 1936 publications contain much useful historical information (especially the former volume); but they too are limited in scope. It is to be hoped that one day a definitive history of the Society will be written. Such a history will require, as well as chronicling the facts, to evaluate the role of the Society over the centuries in shaping the development of the law and the Solicitors' branch of the legal profession in Scotland, to describe the Society and its members in their social context, and to deal with the special interests and achievement of its members, their inter-relationships, education and background. The Society during its long existence has played an important part in the evolution of Scots Law, in the conduct, ethics and organisation of private legal practice, and in the development of legal education and the provision of legal text books. It has also exerted other powerful influences by its involvement in charitable and educational bodies, by the creation of its great Library and its support for scholarship, and in the widespread influence its members have been able to exert in all sorts of situations just because they *were* Writers to the Signet, and because of the esteem and respect in which the Society has been held.